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A CLEAN PEACE

AND

NATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION.

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
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A SPEECH

DELIVERED BY

THE RIGHT HON.

H. H. ASQUITH, K.C., M.P.

AT THE

TOWN HALL, BIRMINGHAM,

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A CLEAN PEACE

AND

NATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION.

Mr. ASQUITH, *speaking at Birmingham on December 11th, 1917, said:*—The date and place of this Meeting were fixed, I think, more than a month ago, certainly at a time when none of us could have foreseen the actual conditions which surround us at this hour.

INVISIBLE AUDIENCES.

At such a moment a responsible speaker ought to remember that, besides those whom he sees before him, and to whose ears his words are immediately directed, he is addressing no fewer than four invisible audiences: his countrymen, the Allies, the neutral world, and last, but by no means least important, the enemy. That gives abundant reason for caution, for the weighing of words, for guarding against plausible but unwarranted inferences, for the avoidance of crude and untempered rhetoric. But it affords no justification for ambiguities and hesitations or for allowing the risk that, in one quarter or another, a phrase or an argument may be misrepresented or honestly misunderstood to confine what is said to the category of safe and colourless generalities. I shall endeavour, at any rate, great as are the hazards of speech, to make my meaning definite and clear.

THE COURSE OF THE WAR.

I cannot forget that with my friend and colleague, Sir Edward Grey, I have a greater responsibility than any living man for the entrance of this country into the war. That is a responsibility as grave as any in history. It was grave indeed in the visible and foreseeable circumstances of the time. But it has become graver still during the years which have followed, in which we have witnessed the enlargement of the area of the war, until it has involved, directly and indirectly, the vast majority of the population of the world; cruelties, unheard of and undreamt of, which have been introduced into its conduct; the constantly growing embitterment of international animosities; the draining away and drying up of the vital resources, human and material, of the future; the accumulation of burdens, which will mortgage the potential wealth and the free development of posterity for generations to come. We have seen the sufferings and desolations, which have still to be redressed and recompensed, of the small countries, Belgium, Serbia, Roumania, whose protection was one of our primary purposes. We have seen our great Ally Russia, who bore manfully so much of the stress and brunt of the early struggles, throwing off the fetters of despotism only to exchange them, so far, for the paralysis of impotence and anarchy.

Heavy, indeed, is the accountability of any man whose hands had a part in lighting the fire which has heated this cauldron with its infernal brew.

NOT OF OUR SEEKING.

It was not of our seeking. We might have held aloof on the plea that our obligation to Belgium was a joint and not a several obligation, and folded our hands while the German armies found their way across Belgian territory for their long-meditated spring upon France. In other words, we could have had peace—for ourselves—at the price, if not of chicanery, at least of dishonour. We held that peace—the most priceless of human blessings—was not worth such a price.

I have often gone over in memory those momentous days at the end of July and beginning of August, 1914, when history will record that the fortunes of freedom, and, indeed, the fate of civilisation, hung in the balance. I say deliberately that with all the knowledge we now have of the then unimagined horrors of a world-wide war, if I had to live the time over again, I should take the same decision.

THE RIGHT PEACE.

Has it been, is it, worth while? some people will ask. It is certainly a question that will be put by history. My answer is, without doubt or hesitation, *Yes*—subject only to one condition, that the war ends in a Peace which secures the attainment of our original purposes, and which contains in itself the safeguards of its own permanence. Such a peace, as I have said more than once, has become the supreme and dominating need of the world, and there is no greater enemy of the human race at this moment than the man, if there be such a man, who by word or act makes it more difficult to achieve.

As to those purposes, I have in two speeches this autumn, at Leeds and Liverpool, set out in positive and concrete form what I conceive them to be. I have nothing to take away from what I then said, and I am glad to observe that President Wilson, in his recent address to Congress, arrives by very nearly the same route practically at the same conclusion. It may therefore be of advantage, if without either repeating or qualifying what I have said before, I say something to-night of what, in my view, our War and Peace Aims are *not*.

LORD LANSDOWNE'S LETTER.

Here I must interject one or two words—they shall be very few—on an event which has caused a good deal of commotion both here and abroad—the publication of Lord Lansdowne's letter. During the whole of my political life, up to the outbreak of the war, Lord Lansdowne has been one of the doughtiest and most formidable opponents of my party, and, after I became its leader, of myself. I learned in the Coalition Government, where he was a most loyal and weighty colleague, to appreciate at first hand the value of his counsels and the ardour of his patriotism. I had no more knowledge than any member of the Government of his letter until I saw it in the Press, and I have no responsibility, direct or indirect, for its terms. But I must confess that much of the criticism which has been passed upon it—I do not, of course, refer to such temperate and restrained comments as those of my right hon. friend who sits here, Mr. Austen Chamberlain—appears to me to arise from

reading into it meanings and intentions which I do not understand it to convey. If Lord Lansdowne had suggested that we should slacken our prosecution of the war, or abandon the cause of one or more of our Allies, or indicate to enemies, who have so far steadily refused to state or even to hint their terms, that we are ready to sue for peace—and I have seen all these interpretations put upon his letter either at home or in other countries—there are few among us who would not dissociate themselves from any such proposals.

A DURABLE PEACE SAFEGUARDED.

But I take the stress of his main argument—apart from subsidiary points—to be this: that the Allies, while pursuing the war with vigour and purpose, should endeavour to make it increasingly clear to the peoples of the world, both belligerent and neutral, that the only aims for which we are fighting are rational and unselfish in themselves, and are those for which we entered the war; and that by their attainment we are convinced that we may look for a durable peace, safeguarded by the conjoint authority of an International League. To use President Wilson's latest words, the aim is to bring into effective existence that "partnership not merely of Governments but of peoples which must henceforth guarantee the world's peace." Even now there is abundant evidence, not that the Governments but that the peoples of the enemy countries are kept artificially in the dark as to our real purposes, both for war and for peace, and I for one shall continue to do what I can to raise the veil, and to let in, if it may be, some rays of light.

WHAT OUR AIMS ARE NOT.

The first, and I believe by far the most dominating and persistent, misconception of our aims is that the ulterior, though unavowed, object of the Allies is not merely to vanquish, but to humiliate, to impoverish, and in the end to annihilate, as a factor in the further and fuller movement of humanity, Germany and the German people.

It has, of course, to be admitted that neither here nor in America has any such purpose ever been formulated or even suggested. I go back to my own summary of our aims at the Guildhall in November, 1914. I said then that we should not sheathe the sword until "the military domination of Prussia is wholly and finally destroyed."

"Prussian militarism"—what have we meant, and what do we mean by that? I cite again President Wilson's latest words, which I think I have anticipated, but which I gladly and gratefully appropriate, as ours no less than his: "No one is threatening the existence, the independence, the peaceful enterprise, of the German Empire." Let me add that no one among the Allies seeks or presumes to prescribe the internal constitution and arrangements of the Germany of the future. It is a root principle of democracy that every organised people is the true, the authentic, the final, and the only responsible judge of its own form of government. That is their own affair.

THE PRUSSIAN SYSTEM MUST END.

What we of the rest of the world are concerned with is not a People but a System—a system which has used as its instrument, first in Prussia, then in the rest of Germany, "that two-handed engine"—the military and the bureaucratic machines carefully and cunningly interlocked. It is that system which has enthroned Force as the sovereign authority, which has held itself at liberty, in the pursuit of its supposed interests, to falsify, to deride, or to supersede (according to the exigencies of the hour) the most solemn pacts ; which claims in effect a more than Pontifical power of self-absolution from the engagements and restraints which safeguard the rights of the peoples of the world. It is this that must come to an end. Germany must learn, as we believe that she is learning, that as a matter of business (apart from sentiment and apart from ethics) *the system does not pay*. We have not, and we do not desire to have, any quarrel internecine and perpetual with the German nation. We acknowledge the contribution which they have made, and we believe will continue to make, to the common stock of knowledge, of research, of invention, of material and intellectual resource. But if there is to be a pact, a real pact, an enduring pact, it must be something more than a paper document written in ink and sealed with wax. It must rest upon authentic proof that the German people are as ready as we are to set up the rule of Common and Equal Right, as not only technically sovereign, but as, in fact, by means of appropriate and effective sanctions, the controlling authority in the world.

THE TRUE FREEDOM OF THE SEAS.

Another, and an equally radical, misconception is that the Allies, and especially Great Britain, are aiming at the destruction, for their own political and economic objects, of what is vaguely called the "freedom of the seas." I have sought in vain for any exact, or even approximate, definition of the meaning of the phrase. No one disputes that in time of peace the seas are, and must continue to be, open to the maritime vessels of all the nations of the world. What stipulation is it, or can it be suggested, that Great Britain, for instance, would propose to embody in the terms of peace which could curtail or fetter this natural and immemorial right? The formula, therefore, if it has any relevance at all, can only be used to indicate some new limitation in time of war upon the belligerent rights of the Power which happens to have the command of the sea. No corresponding limitation is suggested for land warfare, where, indeed, existing conventions of the most solemn character have been in this conflict systematically violated by the enemy. There is, indeed, a sense in which it is well worth considering whether something ought not to be done to secure "the freedom of the seas." I mean, of course, the prosecution of the lawless and infamous submarine campaign, with its ruthless sacrifice of innocent life, which has compelled us to arm our merchantmen, and has exposed, not only belligerents, but neutrals. to hazards and outrages hitherto unknown in the annals of naval war. I do not think that we are likely to hear very much more from enemy lips of the "freedom of the seas."

A CLEAN PEACE.

Finally (under this head) there is the notion that the Peace which we have in view is to be a blind and a disguise for the continuance of war under another name. In my judgment, and I hope in yours, no Peace would be worth the name which, although it involved a suspension of hostilities and the laying down of arms, permitted or contemplated what I called the other day a "veiled war" to be carried on by other methods, but none the less in a belligerent spirit. I have asserted, and shall continue to assert as strongly as any man, our right to use all legitimate methods, economic as well as military, to secure our main purpose, and to bring about such a lasting and fruitful peace as the world needs. The position of the Allies in that matter is stated with perfect lucidity by President Wilson in his recent address, and I respectfully subscribe to and endorse the language which he has used. But when that object is accomplished "we shall be free," as he well and wisely says, "to base peace on generosity and justice, to the exclusion of selfish claims to advantage, even on the part of the victors."

A clean Peace! That is what the people of this country and the Allied peoples desire. And that it may be attained—nothing more, but nothing less—they are unflinching in their resolve, and in their willingness to go on making the necessary efforts and sacrifices.

AT HOME WE MUST REGAIN OUR FREEDOM.

When we are passing in review our Peace Aims, negative and positive, we must include in our range of

vision what is to happen here at home. We shall, of course, recover gradually, but I hope rapidly, freedom from the fetters to which the nation has willingly submitted as war measures—from the central control of trade, from the ties which have been put upon Labour, and its methods of organisation, and from other restrictions, which have been temporarily endured, upon our normal civil and constitutional liberties. There are solemn pledges which have been given in regard to some of these matters which will have to be scrupulously fulfilled.

THE NEW SITUATION AFTER THE WAR.

But apart from this, it is well that we should accustom ourselves, while the war still continues, to envisage the economic and industrial situation which peace will bring in its train. There is no relevant experience, for there has been nothing even approximately like it in the history of the world. Consider for a moment what it will mean. During the last three years a vast proportion of the labour of the country has been, for the time, artificially diverted from its accustomed channels into the naval and military Services, the manufacture of munitions, and other industries ancillary to the conduct of the war. All this will come to an end. We shall not, indeed, see a clean sweep of navies and armies and the instruments and appliances of destruction. The policing of the world will, until the Millennium arrives, be a duty that has got somehow to be discharged, and no League of Nations, however broad its base, can fulfil its trust

unless it has behind it in the last resort the sanction, in one form or other, of coercive power.

RECONSTRUCTION.

Nevertheless, the immediate effect of peace must be in this country a large disbandment of war workers, men and women, both from the fighting forces and from the war-created industries. Side by side with this unexampled process of dislocation and absorption and redistribution we shall find ourselves confronted by obligations in the way of debt and of necessary taxation, the bulk of which it is even yet impossible to forecast. It is, I think, nearly two years since I appointed, and myself presided over, the Committee on Reconstruction, which, with its Sub-Committees and its later development into a Ministry, has ever since been grappling with those problems. It will not be invidious if I mention, as of special value and urgency, the Report on the Relations between Capital and Labour of the Committee which had for its chairman my Right Hon. friend Mr. Whitley

INCREASED PRODUCTION AND FAIRER DISTRIBUTION.

There are two aims which, to my mind, should be steadily kept in view and constantly applied as crucial tests to all schemes and proposals which deal with reconstruction. They sound commonplace enough, but they go to the root of the matter. The first is that we shall need a largely-increased production year

by year of national wealth ; the second is that we must see to it that, as among the producers, there is a fairer distribution of the yield.

BETTER EDUCATION.

In regard to these matters you will not be surprised if I put in the forefront as of paramount importance a comprehensive rebuilding and a far more adequate equipment, from the very bottom to the very top, of our system of national education, of which the Bill introduced by my Right Hon. friend. Mr. Fisher, gives the hope and indeed the promise. To put it from the lowest and most material point of view, it is largely, indeed mainly, through our educational deficiencies that we have either lost or never established some of those basic industries which no great country can afford to be without.

BETTER OPPORTUNITIES AND A MINIMUM WAGE.

The future relations of employers and employed will have to be readjusted, starting from the proposals which I believe to be in spirit and principle almost universally accepted of the Whitley Report ; with developments for securing greater elasticity, more representative authority, and a more vital contact with new conditions, in the organisation of both ; and, above all, with the purpose of achieving for men, women, and children opportunities which were never given them under the old factory system for a free, a more self-developed, a humaner life. The minimum wage, which under the stress of war conditions has been

given statutory authority in the great industry of agriculture, has come to stay, and is certain, as time goes on, to receive wide and, as I believe, beneficent extensions.

A NEW ERA OF LIBERTY AND JUSTICE.

The war has brought with it countless losses and untold suffering, but it has shown us, not only in the deathless heroism of those who have fought for us on land and sea, but in the ungrudging sacrifices which have been made by every class in the community, to attain the common end, that the ancient and ingrained spirit of the British peoples has not been sapped by luxury and comfort, or tainted by cowardice and selfishness, or staled and withered by dotage and decay. It has been at once a revelation and a discipline. It has taught us better and more clearly than any experience in our history that we are all members one of another. It has obliterated old divisions, reconciled traditional enmities, given us as a nation a sense of new values, new perspectives, new ideals. We look to the end with an assured and ever-growing belief that both in the Council Chamber of Peace and in the re-ordering of our own household here at home it will open a new era of liberty and justice.

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